



# Stone Gardens



Lois Cloarec Hart

# Chapter 1

“MARCUS, GET OUT OF HERE.” Grae didn’t take her gaze off Rick or Dylan as she reached down for the eighteen-inch piece of steel rebar she’d tripped over only moments before this confrontation started.

Dylan sneered. “Better do what the dyke says, fag, or we’re gonna rip every earring outta your fucking head, one by one.”

Marcus laid a trembling hand on Grae’s back. Rick and Dylan were blocking his only avenue of escape from the top of the high-rise construction site. Grae tightened her grip on the rebar and began to circle, keeping Rick and Dylan in front of her and Marcus behind her. For a moment she thought they’d get out unscathed, but then Dylan lunged at her.

She slammed the rebar down on his outstretched arm, and he screamed with pain. She whirled and pushed Marcus toward the construction elevator, seconds before Rick roared and tackled her to the unfinished concrete. Marcus stopped his headlong rush and turned back.

“Go, Marcus! Run!” Grae didn’t have time to see whether he obeyed. She fended off Rick’s punches as best she could, at the same time hammering the rebar against his back. He swore and rolled away. She staggered to her feet and dodged Dylan’s hardhat as it sailed in her direction. His distraction failed, and she slammed the rebar into his belly, then twisted to face Rick as he came at her again. He got in one good punch before her weapon connected with the side of his face.

Rick sank to his knees. “You fucking bitch! I’m going to kill you!”

“You’re going over the side this time.” Dylan laughed, his eyes crazy with malicious glee as he tried to outflank her, holding his injured arm to his chest. “Better hope you can fly, cunt.”

Grae retreated. She hurt all over, and she had no doubt that Dylan meant to carry out his threat. She had to keep them from grabbing her. If she could get her back against the stairwell, she'd at least stand a chance of holding them off. *God, Marcus, I hope you're sending the cavalry.* Everyone else on the crew, including the foreman, had gone down for lunch. On Fridays they gathered at one of the pubs on street level, but Marcus and Grae always brought their lunch.

*Should've known something was up when ass-face and asshole stayed behind.* Rick and Dylan had been gunning for her and Marcus for months, but until yesterday they had limited their attacks to trash talk.

They feinted at her from two sides. Grae gasped for breath as she swung the rebar in an arc, fending them off. Suddenly the sound of the elevator rising caught her attention. It was the sweetest sound she'd ever heard.

Dylan and Rick glanced at each other and then at the elevator. They backed off.

The foreman emerged, followed by a uniformed police officer. "What the hell is going on up here?"

"She attacked us," Rick said. "I think she broke my fucking ribs and face."

"Broke my fucking arm, too." Dylan's face contorted as he held out the injury.

Grae winced. The arm hung at an odd angle.

The officer looked at her and put his hand on his gun. "Drop your weapon—now."

Grae let the rebar fall, and he kicked it aside.

"Hands behind your back."

She did as she was ordered. "They came after me! I was only defending myself."

The officer ignored Grae's protest, and she subsided. There would be time enough to defend her actions. For now, her bruises would barely be apparent yet, but the blood dripping down Rick's face and Dylan's grotesque arm were conspicuous evidence against her.

The plastic cuffs tightened, and she gritted her teeth against the pain.

"All of you are coming with me." The officer motioned Rick and Dylan ahead of them while keeping a secure grasp on Grae's arm.

“We gotta go to the ER, man. She broke my fucking arm.”

“You’ll be seen to. Now move.”

The officer marched Grae past the foreman. She cringed at the look of disappointment on his face. He’d gone out on a limb to give her and Marcus jobs after weeks of her impassioned pleas. Looked as if he was regretting the day he’d taken them on as clean-up crew.

*Goddamnit. Why do things always get fucked up to hell and gone? I can’t catch a break.*

The ride down in the elevator was silent except for Rick’s raspy breathing. Grae shot his bloody face a glance and bit her lip. She hadn’t meant to hurt him so badly; she’d only wanted to protect herself and Marcus.

When the door opened on ground level, Rick and Dylan exited first. The officer steered her past them and beckoned to another cop who had just gotten out of his cruiser. “Can you take these two with you? You’ll probably have to run ’em to the ER first.”

Marcus was talking to a third officer and a couple of the construction workers. He looked up, and his eyes widened. “No, no! You’re arresting the wrong person. She was just defending me. She didn’t do anything wrong.”

He tried to run to Grae, but the officer he’d been talking to grabbed his arm. “Let them sort it out at the station, kid. Finish giving me your statement.”

Grae shook her head. “Do what he says, buddy. And then go home—straight home. Wait for me there.”

“But—”

“No buts, Marcus. Do what I say. I mean it. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Do you want me to call your family? Your mom? Ciara, maybe?”

“No, absolutely not.” Grae winced as the officer tugged her away. She twisted, trying to meet Marcus’ gaze. “But call Lucy for me, will you? Tell her I have to cancel our date tonight, but I’ll reschedule as soon as I can.”

Grae’s last glimpse of Marcus as she was stuffed in the back seat of the car was his tear-stained face. “Hang in there. It’ll be okay.”

“You say something?” The officer slid behind the wheel.

“No, sir.”

He grunted and started the car. Grae leaned back against the seat as best she could with her hands cuffed behind her. The adrenaline of the fight had ebbed, leaving her shaky and cold, despite the warm summer day.

“Excuse me?”

The officer glanced in the rear view. “Yeah?”

“Do you know if I’ll be charged, and if so, for what?”

The officer shrugged. “It’s not up to me. I just file my report. Might involve a summary conviction for common assault, but if your record is clean, you could get off with probation.”

Grae groaned softly. *Jesus, I’m screwed.*

“Depending on how bad the other two guys are, you’ll probably be sent home with an appearance notice for Provincial Court.”

*Oh fuck. Screwed, blued, and tattooed. Could this day get any worse?*

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Grae was exhausted. She stumbled off the bus and shambled down the street to the tiny apartment she and Marcus shared. She felt several decades older than when she’d left for work the day before. When she unlocked the door, Marcus jumped from the couch and hurled himself at her.

“Oh, my God, I was so scared. I didn’t know what to do. I kept thinking I should call someone, but I didn’t know who.”

Grae hugged him tightly, and his tall, thin body trembled. “It’s okay, bud. Just tell me that you did call Lucy and you didn’t call my family.”

“Yes and no.” Marcus pulled back and touched the side of her eye. “That’s a helluva shiner. Did they give you anything for it?”

“A first appearance notice for Provincial Court six weeks from now.”

Marcus followed her to the couch, and she dropped into her corner with a sigh.

“I tried to tell them, Grae. I said that Rick and Dylan started the whole fight and you were just protecting me.”

“And myself. I don’t know if they’d have actually done it, but they threatened to throw me over the edge.”

Marcus stared at her in horror. “Jesus Christ! I should’ve stayed with you. They couldn’t have thrown both of us over.”

“No, you did the right thing. No point in the two of us ending up as pancakes. And if you hadn’t sent the troops to rescue me, God knows what would’ve happened.” Grae rolled her head to the side and eyed Marcus. “I’m sorry as hell you had to hear their shit, though. You didn’t deserve that.”

Marcus shrugged. “No worse than I heard for years from dear old Dad before he and Mumsy finally tossed me out on my ass.”

“Their loss, bud. Their loss, my gain.”

Marcus brushed at his eyes. “You’d think I’d believe that by now. You’ve told me enough times.”

“And I’ll keep telling you until you do believe me.” Grae closed her eyes, lethargy pulling her closer to sleep. Then her eyes popped open. “What did Lucy say? Was she totally pissed at me?”

“We can talk about that later, okay? Why don’t I get the mattress down so you can get some sleep.”

Marcus tried to stand, but Grae’s hand clamped on his arm.

“What’d she say?”

His pale skin flushed, and he looked away. “Um...”

“C’mon, bud. I’m just going to imagine the worst, so you might as well tell me.”

He hung his head. “She, um... Do you want her exact words?”

Grae snorted. “Might as well.”

“She said to tell you to go fuck yourself and to never, ever, call her again.” Marcus peered at her from under a hank of hair. “I tried to explain it wasn’t your fault that you ended up in jail, but she wouldn’t listen. She said some other things, too, but I forget now.”

“S okay. I get the gist.”

“I’m real sorry, Grae.”

“It was only our second date. It’s not like she was the love of my life.”

“Still...”

Grae pulled herself upright. “Don’t worry about it. Come give me a hand pulling the mattress down. I need to get some sleep, and then we need to figure out some stuff.”

Marcus followed her into the apartment’s tiny bedroom. “What kind of stuff?”

Grae grabbed one end of the mattress leaning against the wall, and Marcus grabbed the other. With the ease of long practice, they maneuvered it flat between the boxes stacked on both sides of the room. Once it was down, there was no room to walk, but beggars couldn't be choosers. The king-sized mattress was one of her sister Ciara's cast-offs, and she and Marcus had carried it many kilometres one Saturday to get it back to their place.

"Odds are we haven't got our jobs anymore. Not that it would be safe to go back there anyway."

"Don't you think they'd fire Rick and Dylan too?"

"No. They're union men. They get fired, they'll put in a redress. No one's going to take the word of short-time casual labourers over journeymen. That's the way of the world, bud."

"Oh." Marcus frowned. "That's just not right. We're not the bad guys. They are."

Exhausted as she was, Grae had to smile. Despite all he'd been through in his eighteen years, Marcus was still so much an innocent. "They are, and it's not right. But it's reality. We need to figure out if we qualify for Employment Insurance, and if so, get our applications in asap. If we don't, then we have to hustle to find new jobs. Only one McJob each isn't going to pay our bills." She grabbed their bedding off the top of a box and threw it on the mattress. "Hell, we have to hustle anyway. EI and Wal-Mart aren't going to support us for very long in the style to which we've become accustomed."

"I'll start looking right away. I'll go use the computer in the library while you get some sleep."

Grae kicked off her boots, lowered herself to the mattress, and closed her eyes. It was all she had the energy for. "I might have to cut your hair again."

"That's okay. It'll grow." Marcus tapped her foot, and she opened her eyes. "You might have to dye your hair back to one colour, too."

Grae ran her fingers through her multi-coloured strands. "Maybe. We'll see what you find." She rolled onto her side and tucked her hands under the thin pillow.

Marcus left the room, pulling the door closed as far as it would go. It was the last thing she heard before sinking into unconsciousness.

By the time Grae woke up, there was no light seeping around the towel they'd tacked up over the bedroom window. Dim light came from the living room, and she could smell popcorn. She smiled. There were still things that could be counted on in this lousy world, and Marcus eating his comfort food was one of them.

She rolled to her feet and stopped, hunched over. Despite the hours of sleep, her body ached from the beating she'd taken. Unlike Rick and Dylan, her injuries hadn't been considered serious. She had rejected the cursory offer of medical attention because she hadn't wanted to encounter her nemeses in the ER, but she felt the after-effects in full force now.

With painful effort, she straightened up. It wouldn't do to give Marcus any additional cause for concern. There was enough resting on his young shoulders.

She padded out to the living room. Marcus was watching TV with the headset on, a big bowl of popcorn on his lap. He looked up and removed the headset as she approached.

"Got enough to share?" Grae sat down beside him, and he offered her the bowl. She took a handful. "So, how did it go at the library? Find anything?"

Marcus shook his head. "Not a lot. There's not much we're qualified for. I submitted some applications for both of us, though, and I'll keep going back to check on them."

"Don't worry about it too much. We'll find something. We always do, right?"

"Right." The worry lines in his forehead didn't ease, though he stuffed so much popcorn in his mouth that he looked like a chipmunk.

Grae helped herself to more. It wasn't much of a supper, but they'd had worse. Marcus wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and Grae cuffed him.

"Hey, where are your manners? What would your mama say?"

He shot her a wry look. "That I'm the spawn of Satan doomed to the deepest levels of hell?"

"Yeah, well, there is that." Grae shook her head when he extended the bowl. "Nah, I'm not all that hungry."



“Me neither.” Marcus popped another handful into his mouth. When he was able to talk again, he said, “So I was thinking...”

“Mm-hmm?”

He stared straight ahead. “Maybe you should think seriously about going home for a while. You know—get some legal advice, eat some decent meals, sleep in your own—”

“No.”

Marcus sighed and turned to face her. “I’m not kidding, Grae. I looked it up. I might qualify for EI, but you won’t. You might be in some serious shit here, and your family—”

“You’re my family.”

“And I love you for saying that, but we’re not blood. They could—”

“Not an option.” Grae’s anger rose, and she fought to push it down. “We may not have come out of the same womb, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re my little brother. Get that through your fucking head.”

Marcus studied her for a long moment, then snickered. “What kind of language is that to use around your baby brother?”

“Fucking? Like you haven’t said it a thousand times, altar boy.”

“No—womb. What kind of talk is that to use around a self-respecting fag?”

Grae elbowed him and laughed. “Womb, vagina, labia—”

He stuck buttery fingers in his ears. “La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la.”

She wrapped an arm around his skinny neck and knuckled his head. “Idiot.”

She let him go and he leaned back, grinning at her. “So that just makes you the idiot’s sister.”

“Guess it does. Now quit hogging the popcorn.”

“You said you were full.”

“I lied.”

## Chapter 2

GRAE STARED AT THE DOCKET list and tried not to hyperventilate. She'd planned to arrive at least thirty minutes before her scheduled court appearance, but her bus was involved in an accident with an impatient driver, and waiting for a replacement bus had eaten up her margin of safety.

"Ms. Jordan?"

She turned. A baby-faced man with a large briefcase had addressed her. "Yes?"

"I'm Grant Stark, the duty counsel for today. The clerk said you don't have representation?"

"Right."

"Okay, well I'm here to walk you through the process."

"I...don't have money for a lawyer."

Stark shook his head. "There's no charge, but I can't represent you if you choose to plead not guilty and your case goes to trial. You'll have to apply to Legal Aid for that. I'm simply here to help get you through your docket court appearance. I can speak to the Crown prosecutor on your behalf, enter your plea, or reserve it for later." He glanced at his watch. "We don't have much time, though. Do you know what you're going to do?"

"Pass out?"

Stark smiled and patted her arm. "Don't worry. You're appearing before Judge Matheny-Boyd. She's tough, but fair... But she can't stand lateness and you're first up, so let's move."

Grae opened her mouth, then shut it and trotted behind Stark, who never stopped talking as he hurried down the hallway.

“...I only had a few moments to review your case, but from what I could see it’s not necessarily cut and dried.”

“That’s cuz it wasn’t assault. It was self-defence.”

Stark glanced over his shoulder. “I don’t disbelieve you, but bottom line is that you used a weapon, and both men received serious injuries as a result. They have no criminal records; you do, even if it was for summary convictions. It’s your choice, but you may want to consider a plea of guilty with mitigating circumstances. You’re unlikely to get worse than probation, especially since your record has been clean since your last probation ended. In any case, you’ll want to secure legal representation.”

“That sucks. I didn’t do anything but try to keep me and Marcus alive.”

Stark stopped outside a door. “As I said, it’s your choice, but the problem if it goes to trial is going to be lack of physical evidence to support your contention, whereas the Crown would have medical evidence to substantiate the charges.”

He led the way into a crowded court. The judge was just taking her seat as Stark steered Grae into a middle row.

“Whew, just under the wire. You’re first up, so when the clerk calls your name, we’ll go to the front and stand in front of the judge. The charges will be read out, and if you’d like I can request that your plea be reserved for later.”

“It won’t come to—”

The court clerk turned to face the court, and read from a form. “Grae Jordan. Two counts of common assault.” He handed a file to the judge.

Stark stood and led the way to the front of the court. Grae followed, her head down. There was a brief moment of silence as the judge scanned the file, and Grae held her breath.

“I’ll be recusing myself from this case,” the judge said. “Reassign Ms. Jordan to Judge Eisler’s court.”

There was an infinitesimal quiver in the judge’s stern voice, though Grae doubted anyone else in the court had noticed. Grae avoided looking directly at her.

“Yes, Your Honour.” The court clerk took back the file, made a notation, and motioned to Stark.

He shot a puzzled look at Grae, but accepted the revised form.

They exited the court by the front side door.

“Um, I’m not sure what happened there,” Stark said, once they were in the hallway. “Do you know why the judge recused herself?”

“Yes.”

“Want to enlighten me?”

“Not really.”

Stark frowned and consulted the form the clerk had given him. “All right, your call. You’re rescheduled to appear in Judge Eisler’s court three months from now. Do you have any questions?”

“Nope.”

Stark initialed the form and handed it over. “If nothing else, it’ll give you time to consult with Legal Aid. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Stark hustled away down the hallway, and Grae studied the form. Not that it mattered. Her nightmare had come to life, and there was nothing she could do about it.

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A prolonged rapping on the apartment door dragged Grae out of sleep. She lurched to her feet and padded through the living room to answer the summons, rubbing her eyes. She wrenched open the door. “Jesus, did you forget your key again—”

It wasn’t Marcus.

Judge Matheny-Boyd stood stiffly in the dingy hall. “May I come in?”

Grae opened the door wider and stepped aside. “Hello, Thea. I wondered how long it would take you to show up here.”

“I might’ve been here sooner if I’d known how to contact you.” She entered the apartment and looked around.

“Sorry. We’d have cleaned up if we’d known we were having company.”

“We?”

“Me and Marcus, my roommate.”

Thea’s eyebrows shot up. “You have a male roommate?”

Grae snorted and walked to the couch. “Don’t get all excited. Marcus is the baby brother I never had.”

Thea sat stiffly on the other end of the couch. “You have a perfectly good big brother.”

Grae sighed. “I’m guessing you didn’t come to discuss family dynamics. What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me why you didn’t alert me ahead of time that my youngest daughter was going to show up in my court.”

“Wasn’t like I had a choice of judges. I was keeping every finger and toe crossed that it wouldn’t be your court, but that worked about as well as everything else in my fucking life.”

“You should’ve spoken to someone in the Criminal Division about a venue change.”

“You’re not thinking clearly, Mother dear. Did you really want anyone to know your black sheep daughter was up on charges again? You don’t have to give a reason for recusing yourself. I would’ve had to explain why I wanted a different judge, and you can bet that juicy piece of gossip would’ve been all over the building in ten minutes or less.”

There was a long moment of silence. “You...you were protecting me?”

Grae shot her a bitter glance. “Could you act any more surprised?”

Thea studied her. “Is that why you changed your name?”

Grae shrugged and picked at the arm of the chair. “No.”

“Then why? Are you ashamed of us?”

Startled, Grae looked up, meeting her mother’s gaze. She was shocked at the pain she saw there. “I think you’ve got things backwards.”

“We’ve never been ashamed of you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Grace, I—”

“It’s Grae. I won’t answer to anything else.”

“All right...Grae.” Thea took a deep breath. “I want to help.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Uh-huh. Because you’re doing so well on your own.”

Grae straightened, trembling with fury. “I was doing fine until those assholes attacked us and threatened to throw me off the fifteenth floor of the construction site. Forgive me if I didn’t stand still and let them toss me, Mom. But hey, maybe that would’ve made it easier for all of you. No more worrying about when the bad penny might turn up.”

“Stop it! Right now.”

It was her mother’s judge voice, stern and commanding. Grae had been helpless against it most of her life, but not any longer. “You don’t get to order me around. We’re not in your court, and you have no jurisdiction over me.”

A key turned in the lock, and both their heads turned to the door.

Marcus walked in, a grocery bag in hand, and stopped short. “Um, hi. Sorry to interrupt.”

“Don’t worry about it, bud. My mother was just leaving.”

“Not until I say what I’ve come to say.”

*Fuck. I know that tone.* “All right. Say it.”

“I’ll just get out of your way.” Marcus dropped the grocery bag on the counter and hurried to the bedroom, closing the door as much as he could behind him.

Grae suppressed a smile. He might’ve been out of sight, but she’d bet her miniscule paycheque that he was eavesdropping.

“I read the arrest report.”

Grae studied her mother. “And?”

“You do have some factors in your favour. There are witness accounts that the victims had verbally harassed you and Mr. Lyndon for weeks before the assault. Both the foreman and police officer first on the scene report that the men had you backed up against a wall. Those could be mitigating circumstances.”

“What part of they were fucking going to throw my ass over the side doesn’t anyone get?”

Thea shuddered and closed her eyes for a moment. “Be that as it may, if this case came before me—”

“It did, remember? That’s why you’re here.”

Thea’s gaze drilled into Grae. “I’m here because whether you believe it or not, I love you just as much as I love your brother and sister.”

Grae blinked and sat back.

“And as pig-headed as you are, I’m praying you’ll have the good sense to hear me out and take my advice.”

“Okay.”

It was Thea’s turn to blink. “Okay?”

Grae gave a wry chuckle. “I may be the stupid one of the family, but even I’m not dumb enough to turn away free legal counsel. And it’s not like I could afford to hire Virgil.”

“Your brother would represent you for free, you know that.”

“I wouldn’t ask him.”

“You don’t have to. He’s already volunteered.”

“Huh.”

“But there is one condition.”

Grae slumped wearily and banished thoughts of competent legal counsel. “Of course there is. Tell me what it is, I’ll reject it. Then you can consider your duty done and leave.”

“Damn it, Grace!”

“Grae. It’s Grae, Mother. If you can do nothing else for me, at least use my chosen name.”

“Grae.” Thea drew a deep breath. “We all want to help. Me, your father, Virgil, Ciara—”

“I can see where you and Virg might help, but what’s Dad going to do—keep all his stations from featuring me on the six o’clock news?”

“Don’t kid yourself. You’re not important enough to make the evening news.”

Grae scowled. “Don’t kid *yourself*. If my name were still Grace Jordan Matheny-Boyd, you can bet your ass my arrest would be a banner headline, complete with video of me doing a perp-walk.”

Thea ignored her. “You asked what your father could do, so here’s the condition of our help—his, Virgil’s, and mine. You accept private counselling that we will pay for until your therapist deems you ready to take on a more productive role in society.”

“Might be a little difficult if I’m in lock-up.”

“You won’t be. Virgil will see to that. At worst you’ll get probation and community service. But with your record, if you don’t accept our help, we’ll wash our hands of your case and you’ll go to jail. Note, I did *not* say wash our hands ‘of you.’ We’ll still be there for you when you come out of jail, but we won’t step in to try to prevent you from being sentenced to prison time. You’ve skated too many times on lesser offences. I think that’s part of your problem. So I’m offering you one last chance.”

“It’s not fair,” Marcus said.

Grae glanced behind her. Marcus stood in the bedroom doorway, his hands clenched and his face red.

“Your daughter saved my ass on that rooftop, maybe even my life, and not for the first time. And all of you think she’s guilty of something. She’s not! She’s the victim.”

“It’s okay, bud.”

Marcus took several steps toward them. “No, it’s not. What’s the matter with your family? Do they have any clue who you really are?” He glared at Thea. “The first time your daughter saved my life was when my family tossed me out of their ever-so-God-fearing home for being a fourteen-year-old fag. I was hustling my ass on the street just trying to make enough to eat. She fed me when I was hungry, found me honest work, and took me into her home.”

“Such as it is.” Grae shot him a wry smile.

“Beats the hell out of trying to find someplace warm to survive a winter night. Beats the living hell out of fending off the freaks and pervs who think you’re nothing more than a piece of ass, even when you’re not working.” Tears ran down Marcus’ cheeks. “I’d have been dead by now, inside if not out. You saved me. I’ll never forget that.”

Grae stood and took him in her arms. They rocked together in a tight embrace, for a long moment. Then Thea cleared her throat, and they both turned to look at her. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, but her shoulders were rigid and her expression grave.

“Marcus, believe it or not, I’m trying to do what’s best for my daughter. Please, both of you, sit down and hear me out.”

They sat, facing Thea.

She leaned forward and rested a hand on Grae’s knee. “You took yourself out of our family. I know you don’t believe me—don’t believe any of us—but we never stopped loving and missing you. We did not, and would never, kick you out. Please, please, let us help.”

“With therapy?” Grae shook her head. “I’m working two McJobs and barely getting by as it is, even with Marcus’ help. Between my day shift and overnight shift, I barely have time to grab some sleep. No way can I work therapy into my schedule. It’s not like Wal-Mart gives any



benefits or breaks to shelf stockers, and I'm lucky to get a free burger and fries at my other job."

"Then quit one of your jobs and let us provide you accommodations. You know we have multiple rental properties in our portfolio. Let me look into finding you something appropriate."

"Not if the deal doesn't include Marcus. I'm not going anywhere without him."

"It's okay—"

Grae shot him a glance over her shoulder. "That's non-negotiable, now and always. You go where I go, or I don't go."

"I've always admired your loyalty to your friends," Thea said. "Of course it applies to Marcus, too. I'll even ensure that it's a two bedroom, so you can each have your own space."

Grae studied Marcus. "What do you think, bud?"

"I think... I think we're going to have to flip for who gets the mattress."

"You can have it. I'll get an air mattress. After all, I get a store discount."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Thea slapped Grae's knee. "I'll make sure the place is furnished, mattresses and all."

"Hey, child abuse! What would people say if they knew the honourable judge beat her child?"

Thea rose to her feet. "Given the circumstances, I'm sure they'd be very understanding. You could exasperate a saint, and I am not a saint." She held out her hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Grae stood. "Who picks the therapist?"

"I do. I have the perfect person in mind, if she'll agree to take you on."

Marcus jumped to his feet, picked up Grae's arm, and waggled it at Thea. "C'mon, Grae. Shake on it before your mom changes her mind."

Grae looked sideways at him with a small grin. "You know absolutely nothing about negotiating, do you?"

"Maybe not, but I'm tired of listening to Ben gnaw on the furniture in the middle of the night."

"Ben?" Thea asked. "A boyfriend?"

Grae and Marcus laughed. "No, Mom. Ben is our resident rat. We never see him in the daylight, but we sure see the evidence that he's been around."

Marcus nodded. "He's a big pooper."

Thea shuddered. "Good lord! Why don't you complain to your landlord?"

"And give him reason to evict us?" Grae shook her head. "No thanks. Affordable housing is impossible to find in this city. We've put up with Ben for over a year now. He's practically one of the family."

"I won't be sad to leave Catie and her brood behind, though," Marcus said.

Thea raised an eyebrow. "I almost hate to ask. Catie?"

Grae grinned. This was almost too much fun. "Catie the cockroach. Actually, we're not sure which one is Catie, because she seems to have invited all her relatives in over the summer. I don't want to sound racist, but they all look alike to us."

Thea paled and began to back away.

Grae followed her. "Really though, I hate the silverfish most. Don't know why, except they keep waking me up when I'm trying to sleep. At least Catie's gang stay off my face."

"Which reminds me." Marcus walked to the counter where he'd dropped the groceries. "I found some roach spray on sale."

"Excellent. We'll get some decent sleep until it runs out, then."

Thea had reached the door. She turned the handle, then stopped. "Would you be willing to give me your phone number?"

Grae's smile faded. "I can't afford a phone. You can reach me through Marcus, though. The boy couldn't live without his cell, even if it means eating popcorn for supper three nights a week."

"587-880-2141," Marcus said. "I'll make sure Grae gets any messages."

"Thank you." Thea entered the number in her phone and tucked it back in her purse. "I'll be in touch."

She hesitated in the doorway, and Grae fought an unexpected impulse to hug her goodbye.

"Did you want me to convey any messages to your dad? Or Virgil or Ciara?"

"Sure. Tell them I said hi." It was the best Grae could do for now, but her throat closed at the look of disappointment on her mother's face.

"All right. I'll be back to you in a few days."

"Okay."

## Chapter 3

ABAN POKED HIS HEAD AROUND the corner. “Lunch time. See you in the break room?”

Grae nodded. “Marcus is stocking shampoo. I’ll just grab him, and we’ll see you there.” She shifted the case of toilet tissue she’d been unloading to the side. Even at four in the morning, their supervisor frowned on potential hazards left in the middle of an aisle.

She found Marcus sniffing a bottle of shampoo. “Hey, glamour guy, it’s break time.”

He recapped the shampoo and added it to the shelf. “Coming.” He caught up with her, and they walked to the back of the store. “We have to try that new shampoo. It smells like coconut and mango, wrapped up in lotus blossoms.”

Grae snorted. “Like you’d know a lotus blossom if one fell on your head.”

Marcus linked his arm through hers. “Well, it beats that stuff you buy. That shit smells like tarpaper and baby poop.”

“I got it on a two-for-one sale.”

“Uh-huh. You either have to sniff before you buy, or let me take over responsibility for all our toiletries.”

“Fine. But if you send me out into the world smelling like some frou-frou femme, you and I are going to have words.”

Marcus laughed and held the door open for her. “Don’t worry. It’s Axe for you, and Crabtree and Evelyn for me.”

“It’s whatever’s on sale for both of us, bud.”

His shoulders slumped. “I know.”

Aban beckoned to them from a table. His meal was already steaming in front of him. Grae grabbed her and Marcus' lunches from the fridge and slid in across from him.

"So, how is the world treating you, my young friends?" Aban shovelled a bite into his mouth.

Grae's nostrils flared at the fragrant scent. "It'd be treating us a lot better if you could convince Mrs. Jalali to send enough to feed all of us one of these days."

Aban stopped chewing. "You like Persian food?"

"If it all smells like that, then yes."

Marcus nodded as he bit into his peanut butter sandwich. "What she said."

"Then you must come to my home one day for dinner. I will ask Parveneh to cook for you all her favourites. You will think you are in heaven."

Grae smiled. "Our heaven or yours?"

Aban shrugged. "It's all the same neighbourhood, no?" He took another bite and murmured in contentment. "Oh, I forgot to tell you—you were right, Grae."

"I was? That's new. About what?"

"I changed my approach. I sat Nasim down and talked to him, rather than just ordering him to give up his foolishness."

"Cool. So did he change his mind?"

Aban sighed. "No. He's still set on getting a tattoo, but I begin to make peace with the idea. Perhaps in a little while, I will say yes." He glanced at Grae's arms. "Please, it is not that I think your tattoos are wrong, but it is not the custom of my family. And Nasim is only seventeen."

"No problem. I like my ink, but it's not for everyone."

Aban pointed to the most prominent design on Grae's forearm. "I like that one very much. It is bold...yet tender. It suits you."

Grae glanced at Marcus and smiled. "That's what he said when he designed it for me."

Aban's eyebrows rose. "You designed this?"

Marcus nodded.

"It is so beautiful." Aban peered at the female knight—her helmet was off, revealing multi-coloured streaks in her dark hair, and her sword

tip rested on a brilliant crimson rose. He glanced from Marcus to Grae, and back to Marcus. "This is the way you see her, is it not?"

Marcus blushed, but nodded again.

"He drew it the first night he moved in with me. As soon as I got a decent paycheque from my last job, I went and had it done. It's my favourite."

"If Nasim chose something like this, Parveneh and I would not be unhappy, though perhaps a little smaller."

"Maybe you should ask Marcus to design something for Nasim."

Marcus shook his head forcefully. "Bad idea. He wouldn't want that."

"Well, not something like my knight, no, but you draw beautifully, bud. I bet if you talked to Nasim and found out what he had in mind, you could come up with something rad."

"No, I—"

"Please, Marcus." Aban extended his hand. "You and Grae come for dinner, okay? You talk to Nasim. Show him your art. I do not want him getting a skull and snake."

Marcus cast a troubled glance at Grae, but before he could answer, their supervisor stepped through the door.

"Yo, Aban! Truck's here. You're up."

Aban rose to his feet, hastily tucking the remnants of his lunch back into his bag. "I'm coming." He looked at Grae and Marcus. "Dinner soon? Okay?"

Grae answered for them both. "Sure. We'll work out a good time later."

Aban nodded and hurried away, tossing his lunch into the fridge before he left the room.

"Damn it, Grae, do you know what you just did?"

"What? I got you a new client—non-paying, but at least you'll have the pleasure of seeing your art on someone else's body besides mine. Plus we get a free meal. What's so bad about that?"

Marcus closed his eyes and shook his head. "You just don't get it."

Grae frowned. "Enlighten me."

"Guys like Nasim...seventeen-year-old boys...those are my peers. I know the way they think. I'm the last one they want to hang with. He may not be able to avoid me in his parents' house, but he's not going to be happy to have some gay boy drawing a tat for him."

“Jesus, bud, it’s not like he’s going to beat you up when we’re invited guests.”

“I didn’t think he was. But it’s also not fair to put him in such an uncomfortable position. What if Aban tells his son to take me to his room to look over my drawings?”

“Then you go along and behave like a gentleman, and he does the same. I don’t get it, Marcus. It’s not like Aban is blind to who we are. He’s never treated us any differently. Why does this have you freaked out?”

“Aban’s a grown man, and a good dude. His son... Well, I went to school with lots of guys like that. It wasn’t fun.”

“You don’t know what Nasim’s like. You don’t know that he’s a phobe, and even if he is, no way is Aban going to let him get on your case.”

“Maybe.”

The handful of workers still in the break room began to drift out. Grae folded her empty paper bag and put it in her back pocket. Marcus did the same, and they rose to leave.

“I’ll meet you by the back entrance when we’re done, okay?”

Marcus nodded and walked off, head down.

Grae watched him go and bit her lip. She didn’t want Marcus to think the whole world was composed of Dylans and Ricks, but his fear was contagious. Maybe she’d better deflect Aban’s invitation after all.

\* \* \*

Grae and Marcus stood in front of their apartment building, watching traffic.

“What does your sister drive?”

Grae shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. It was some kind of an SUV parked there when we went to pick up the mattress. I have no idea if she’s still got it. There might be some kind of rule that oil execs can’t drive the same car two years in a row.”

“That wouldn’t have been her car, anyway. She wasn’t home that day.”

“I know, but they could’ve been out in Bai’s vehicle.”

Marcus elbowed Grae and chuckled. “Remember the look on the housekeeper’s face when she asked where our truck was, and we told her we were carrying the mattress home?”

Grae laughed. “I thought the poor woman was going to fall over in shock.”

“It was a heavy bugger. That had to be the longest walk I’ve ever taken.”

“But we made it.” Grae straightened as she recognized Ciara behind the wheel of an approaching vehicle. “She’s here.”

A black Cadillac Escalade pulled to the curb. Grae got in the front seat and Marcus in the back.

“Thanks for picking us up,” Grae said.

Ciara checked her mirror, then glanced at Grae before she pulled back into traffic. “You’re welcome.”

“Um, this is Marcus.” Grae jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “Marcus, this is my sister, Ciara.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” Marcus said.

“You, too.”

An awkward silence fell as Ciara navigated away from their apartment and headed north. Grae cast about for a possible topic of conversation. “Um, thanks again for the mattress. We really appreciated it.”

“We did, thanks from me, too,” Marcus said. “It beats sleeping on the floor, that’s for sure.”

Ciara’s lips tightened. “You’re welcome.”

Grae stroked the leather seat. “Sweet ride.”

“It’s Bai’s. Believe it or not, my car is a Prius.”

“Priuses are good, but I guess you could carry a lot of stuff in here when you need to.”

“Uh-huh. Could’ve carried that mattress for you.”

Grae cast an uneasy glance back at Marcus, who shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think it would’ve fit, even in here.”

“We have a roof rack. For that matter, our next-door neighbour would’ve brought it over in his van. There were options. You didn’t have to carry it all the way home.”

“We didn’t mind. We...uh...didn’t want to impose on anyone.”

Ciara glanced at Grae with an expression that reminded her acutely of their mother's when she was in full-on judge mode. "No, you never do."

That was the last thing anyone said until she pulled into the long driveway of a beautifully landscaped apartment building a few blocks from the river.

Marcus gave a low whistle. "Nice."

They passed a bronze sign set in a bed of colourful fall flowers: *Skyview Towers*. Grae stared out the window. It was an older building, but that didn't detract from its appearance. Dark brick and extensive use of glass gave it an airy and elegant appeal. She noted the large balconies, and the number of units that had grills, lawn chairs, and bicycles stored there.

"Are you sure this is where we're supposed to meet Mom?" Grae asked as Ciara slowed to a halt at the front entrance.

"Of course. Dad and Virgil will be here too."

Grae tensed, then relaxed as Marcus' hand settled on her shoulder. If it didn't work out, if her family tried to steamroll them, they hadn't lost anything but a ride home. They had their transit passes. They'd find their own way back to their apartment if necessary.

"Come on. They're waiting for us upstairs." Ciara parked in a guest slot, exited the vehicle, and strode toward the front entrance. Grae and Marcus scrambled to keep up.

Ciara hit the button beside 407, and they were buzzed in. She led the way to the elevators. They rode up in silence, Grae and Marcus standing together on one side, and Ciara on the other.

Apartment 407 was just down the hall from the elevator. Thea waited in the doorway. She smiled at Grae. "I'm glad you were able to make it."

"We haven't got long. We have to get some sleep before our next shift."

Thea frowned. "Haven't you given up your second jobs yet?"

Grae shook her head. "We thought we'd better see if this works out first."

"Why wouldn't it?" Ciara's tone was challenging.

Thea shot her a glare. "Your sister is being commendably cautious. Please, come in and take a look around. See what you think."



Grae edged past Ciara, who was engaged in a staring match with Thea. Marcus stayed so close he almost tripped Grae by stepping on her heels. She raised one eyebrow at him, and he mirrored her right back.

“Relax, bud. If it’s not cool, we go home, okay?” Grae whispered.

“Okay.” Marcus stopped short as they entered the living room.

Grae’s father and brother rose to their feet.

“Marcus, this is my dad, Carter, and my brother, Virgil.”

Virgil stepped forward and offered his hand. Marcus shook it. “Nice to meet you.” He turned to his sister. “Nice to see you again, Grae.”

“You, too.” Grae almost smiled at how carefully Virgil pronounced her name. *Guess Mom briefed him.* “Hi, Dad.”

He nodded, but didn’t extend his hand. “Marcus, nice to meet you.”

“Thanks. Nice to meet you, too, sir.”

Thea and Ciara had finished their battle of the glares and moved up behind them. Thea touched Grae’s back. “Why don’t you and Marcus explore the apartment? We’ll wait for you here.”

“Okay. C’mon, Marcus.” They walked down the hallway and looked into the first bedroom. It was fully furnished and next door to a complete bath.

Marcus nodded. “Nice. Guess this one would be mine, eh?”

“If you like. I don’t care if you want the master.”

“Your family might, and they’re footing the bill.”

Grae turned to face him. “It’s not a done deal, bud. We don’t have to say yes. If you’re going to feel like a second-class citizen in your own home, then I don’t want to live here.”

Marcus looked around the room wistfully. “I’ve never had such nice digs.”

“Then let’s look at the rest of the place.” They continued to the master bedroom.

“Damn, Grae! Look at that. You’ve got your own balcony. You can watch the sun come up.”

“Go down, you mean. It faces west.”

“East, west, who cares? You can bet your ass won’t be no rat chewing on the furniture.” Marcus practically danced across the room to the walk-in closet. “Double damn! You could practically fit our whole bedroom in here.” He whirled and rushed to the en suite. “Oh, my freaking God! You have got to see this.”

Grae laughed as she crossed the room and ducked under his arm. “Not bad.”

“Not bad? Are you kidding? You could swim laps in that bathtub. You’re going to feel like you’re living in the Ritz-Carlton, woman.”

“No, you are. I want you to take this room.”

“Are you insane? No way.”

“Yes, way. I’m serious, bud. I spent most of my life living in rooms like this. I’m totally cool with the other bedroom. I want you to have this one, en suite and all. Besides, my wardrobe would look stupid in that walk-in. I just need a place for my boots, jeans, and tees. You’ll have room to spread out in here.”

Marcus turned back to the room and spun in a slow circle, an awestruck expression on his face.

“But you have to promise me you’ll keep all your shit inside this bedroom, okay? I’d like to keep our common areas reasonably clutter-free.”

Marcus tilted his head. “You’re a neat freak? How could I live with you three years and not know that?”

“Because we don’t have the space over there to be clutter-free. We need every square inch of that dump. But here, we can do better.”

He smiled. “Next thing you’re going to tell me is that we’re going to add veggies to our diet.”

“A salad or two a week wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Maybe we could grow our own garden out on that great big balcony.”

Grae laughed, then sobered. “I’m pretty sure management wouldn’t approve, but mostly...I don’t think we should get too attached to this place.”

Marcus sank down on the bed. “Why? Do you think they’ll boot us out?”

“I’ll make sure I get an agreement for a year’s residency. And I’ll go along with their terms to secure that for us, but I’m not about to cede my life to anyone, no matter how much nicer this place is than ours.”

“Then maybe we should just tell them no. Maybe it’s better to stay where we are.”

Grae shook her head. “You deserve better than that rathole we’ve been in. If it’s only a year, it’s only a year. We’ll find someplace new after

that. Maybe we'll even leave the city and seek our fortunes elsewhere. We can do anything we want."

Marcus studied her with troubled eyes. "If you're going to be unhappy, this," he gestured around the room, "is not worth it to me. I'm dead serious."

"I know you are, and I appreciate it." Grae took a deep breath. "Let's go talk to the parental units and see what they have to say."

Marcus shook his head as he stood. "No. You talk to them alone. This is family business."

"You are—"

"I know, but in this case, I think it's better blood deals with blood. I'll wait down in front of the building."

Grae walked Marcus to the door, then hugged him. "I'll be down in a few. Stay out of trouble, bud."

"What kind of trouble could I possibly get into?" He grinned, and she knuckled his head.

They laughed softly together, and he left.

Grae turned to find her family staring at her. "What?"

"We've just never..."

"What Virgil means," Thea shot a warning glance at her son, "...is that it's nice to see how well you get along with your roommate."

"Told you. He's my little brother." Grae brought a chair from the dining room and sat down to face them. Her mother regarded her calmly. Her father wouldn't meet her gaze. Her brother looked sad, and her sister looked mad. *Situation normal*. "The place is nice. What are the terms?"

"Trust you to cut right to the chase," Ciara said with asperity.

"And trust you to—"

"Enough. You two will be civil to each other, is that understood?" Thea asked.

Without looking at each other, Grae and Ciara nodded.

"All right. Grae, we've signed a lease for the next year. You and Marcus can move in as of the first."

"Okay."

"That's all you've got to say?" Ciara spat. "Not 'gee, thanks for rescuing me from a slum,' or maybe, 'thanks for not disowning my sorry ass?'"

Thea jumped to her feet. “Ciara! What did I just say?”

Ciara never took her eyes off Grae. “It’s true, Mom, and you can’t gloss over it. She’s bloody selfish and inconsiderate, and you just let her get away with it. You’ve always done that. No wonder she turned out the way she did.”

Surprised at how calm she felt, Grae looked at Ciara, and rose. “Good to see you all again.” She spun and walked quickly to the door.

She was as far as the elevator when Thea and Virgil caught up to her.

Her mother seized her arm. “Please don’t go. Come back and talk to us. Please?”

Grae turned and regarded them wearily. “Why?”

“Ciara doesn’t speak for all of us,” Virgil said. “I don’t feel that way. Mom doesn’t.”

“But Dad and Ci do. That’s fifty percent of the family.”

Thea shook her head. “No, honey, it’s not. It’s only forty percent.”

“Math? You’re using math to debate me?” Grae shook her head.

“I’ll use anything...anything at all that will persuade you to let us help.”

Grae blinked at the fierceness in her mother’s voice. The elevator door opened, and she hesitated.

“If not for us, do it for your... Do it for Marcus,” Virgil said.

Grae sighed and allowed the elevator door to close. “Damn it.” She lightly punched Virgil’s arm. “When’d you get to be such a good lawyer?”

He glanced at their mother. “I had the best teacher.”

Grae closed her eyes for a long moment. She could almost hear her mother and brother holding their breath. She opened her eyes and nodded. “All right.”

Virgil grabbed her in a hug and jounced her up and down.

“Ugh, take it easy there, bro.” Grae gently broke out of his embrace. “Good thing I haven’t eaten yet.”

He grinned and started back to the apartment.

Thea took Grae’s hands. “Thank you.”

“For what? You’re doing me the favour—me and Marcus. We should be thanking you.”

Thea’s eyes glistened. “For giving us...for giving me another chance.”

Grae's throat tightened. She tried to speak, stopped, and tried again. "I can't make any promises, Mom. I'm not very good at...well, pretty much anything. I don't want to disappoint you."

"You'll try. I'll try. All we can do is our best, honey." Thea released Grae's hands. "Come, let's rejoin the others."

"You're not going to make me come to family dinners, are you? There are only so many of Ciara's death-glances I can take."

Thea shook her head. "I'm not going to make you do anything except see the therapist. But maybe someday you and Marcus would like to come to dinner, of your own volition, of course. You know you're always welcome."

"Maybe." They reached the door, and Grae laid a hand on her mother's arm.

Thea turned to look at her. "Yes?"

"Thank you for...for coming after the hundredth sheep."

Thea smiled. "Always." She stepped aside to let Grae precede her into the apartment. "Good to know all those years of Sunday school weren't wasted."

Grae rolled her eyes, but couldn't suppress a soft chuckle.

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# STONE GARDENS

BY LOIS CLOAREC HART

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